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AUTHOR Moss, R. Kay; Stansell, John C.
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ABSTRACT

Young children learn many important things about language from the television and radio ads they encounter that can help them learn to read and write. They learn that print carries messages that are personally important to them, that whatever can be said can also be written, what some forms of written language look like, and that language use can be fun and is often predictable. Parents and teachers can use these commercials to help young children become better readers and writers. Among other things, parents can encourage their children to write down their favorite ads, to modify them, or even to make up their own; they can have them write for real purposes, such as letters or kitchen duty lists; and they can let their children see them reading books or magazines. Teachers can allow students to write their own advertisements for unusual products or even for their best friends, have them write a script to a television ad, and let each student write an advertisement jingle.
(JL)

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Television and Radio Ads as Resources for
Reading and Writing

R. Kay Moss

John C. Stansell

Texas A&M University

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John C. Stansell

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Television and Radio Ads as Resources for Reading and Writing

It's Saturday morning. You stumble out of bed to the clamor of the TV set and make your way to the family room. There you discover your five-year-old glued, as usual, to the morning cartoons. After a few minutes, you manage to drag her away from the set and focus her attention on a bowl of BooBerries. In a few more minutes the BooBerries have grown soggy, but her interest in the TV screen is quite crisp--her favorite commercial is on. She sings along with the catchy little jingle, and continues to sing it despite your inspired strategies for interesting her in breakfast well after the show has resumed.

Later in the day, she accompanies you to the grocery store. On the way, the car radio is dispensing its usual commercial fare and another advertising

jingle captures her attention. All during the time at the store, she sings her way through several of the ads that she has encountered and clutches at several of the products they praised so highly. She is not particularly moved by your arguments that you don't need those products today.

By the end of the day, you are probably thoroughly annoyed with media ads in general and tuneful little jingles in particular because you are convinced that they result in soggy cereal at best and soggy brains at worst. There is no doubt that they do capture the attention of children, often at inopportune times. Nor is there any doubt that children do seem to learn them rapidly and thoroughly, singing or repeating them over and over to the occasional annoyance of adults.

But young children learn many important things about language from the ads they encounter which help them learn to read and write. They learn that print carries messages that are personally important to them - messages about toys, games, and breakfast foods. They learn that whatever can be said can also be written, and they learn what some forms of written language look like. They also learn that language in use can be great fun. And as they enjoy television commercials, children learn to use the print features they have seen in the ads to identify their favorite products on store shelves.

The jingles and slogans themselves demonstrate that language can be and often is predictable. The language of commercial advertising is natural and not stilted; it has both rhythm and rhyme; it has recurring patterns, and often recurring lines. In these respects it is similar to the language found in many works of children's literature (Rhodes, 1981) and many songs and rhymes that children have enjoyed for generations.

So we would contend that despite their problems and faults, television and radio advertisements represent important learning resources for beginning

readers and writers - resources that both parents and teachers would do well to capitalize on during the preschool and elementary school years.

The following suggestions for parents and teachers are based on our belief that young children demonstrate their strengths as language learners and language users when they learn the jingles and slogans of ads. They are able to take advantage of the whole context of a commercial to begin to identify and learn key features of print. They are able to use the predictable features of language to learn how language works and how to control and use it. Since these language abilities are by no means restricted to children's encounters with ads, some of our suggestions for reading and writing development involve creating opportunities for involvement with other forms of language.

Suggestions to Parents

1. Since radio and television ads are a part of your children's lives, make the most of them. Let them use what they learn about print from television to help you write your shopping list and to find products in the store. Encourage them to write down their favorite ads (or let them ask you to write them) so they can be kept and read later. Suggest that they make up ads, or modify ones they've heard; these can also be written down for permanent use.
2. Provide the materials your children need for writing - paper and pencils, crayons, and felt tip pens. Make these materials accessible to each child, even the youngest.
3. Encourage your children to write. React to the content of their messages rather than just the forms of their letters or their spelling.
4. Allow your children to write for real purposes: kitchen duty lists, letters to grandparents, and notes to you are all real reasons for children to write, in addition to writing down favorite ads or composing new ones.

5. Read with them the ads they have written. Take turns reading them, or let them "take over" the reading whenever they can. React to their pleasure in reading and to their ability to understand the message conveyed in print, rather than providing instruction or drills.
6. Read other materials with your children, letting them do as much of the reading as they can.
7. Let your children see you reading your own books or magazines. If they show an interest in these, think of ways to share them. Read excerpts to them that you enjoy, and talk about interesting, exciting, or amusing parts.
8. Provide a variety of reading materials for your children, including both new and classic children's stories, rhymes, and songs. Keep these materials in a place that is accessible to all.

Suggestions to Teachers

1. Allow students to write their own advertisements for unusual products or even their best friend. Compile these into a book for your class library.
2. Compile the songs your students know into a class song book. Let each student write the advertisement jingle, playground song, or family favorite on a separate page with an illustration.
3. Have your students write the script to a television ad, or even a favorite program. These can be dramatized through creative dramatics or puppetry.
4. Stock your class library with predictable books. Children are able to read these almost immediately after hearing them as little as one time. Rhodes (1981) lists an excellent bibliography of many predictable books as resources for reading and writing instruction. Share this list with parents as the opportunity arises.

With both parents and teachers building on the language experiences of children and on their strengths as language learners, early reading and writing can be both successful and enjoyable for all concerned.

REFERENCE

Rhodes, Lynn K. "I Can Read! Predictable Books as Resources for Reading and Writing Instruction." The Reading Teacher, vol. 34 (February 1981), pp. 511-518.